A Cross Cultural Approach to Courtesy: A Sociolinguistic Study of Differences between Native and Non-Native Speakers of English

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Abstract
Courtesy is a matter of significant importance in the study of the different cultures, and how to be courteous in a certain culture depends, to a great extent, on the social norms and behaviors of that culture (or social group). Therefore, what could be taken as 'courteous' in one society may be frowned upon as 'discourteous' in another. The current study approaches this topic in a twofold way: on the one hand, it highlights the erroneous uses of courtesy by Iraqi students of English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL) as compared to courtesy norms adhered to by the native speakers of English, as well as draw a dividing line between the ways in which courtesy is used by female and male students of EFL in Iraq. It is hypothesized that there are remarkable differences between the courtesy rules by the native speakers of English and those of the non-native; and, that there are differences between male and female non-native speakers of English for the favour of the females. To achieve its purpose, the current study relies on sociolinguistic concepts, such as Cultural Knowledge, Gender Differences, Variance, etc. It also depends on a questionnaire which is distributed to Iraq EFL students at the University of Babylon to test the proposed hypotheses. The study finds out that, due to the transfer from their first language's cultural norms, the non-native speakers of English use the courtesy norms of English erroneously; and that female non-native EFL speakers rely more on courteous norms than males do.
Key Words: Courtesy, Culture, Gender, Sociolinguistics, Norms

1. Introduction
        Learning a certain language entails learning not only its vocabulary, rules of lexical organization, pronunciation, etc., but it is a must that its cultural knowledge is made comprehendible to the learner of that language. As such, the learners of the language need to keep the social rules in mind whenever they communicate in that foreign language if that want to be understood clearly and accurately.
However, each linguistic community has its own social restrictions in terms of what is polite (or courteous) and what is not. As a result, language learners need to be acquainted with those rules of communication. English, being the language which is mostly used in the world nowadays, is a perfect example for such a topic. Often, learners of English do not get ample teaching of the formal social norms which are used by the native speakers of English which, consequently, leads to misunderstanding when they are face with a relevant situation with a native speaker.

2. Culture and Language
        The term culture has been dealt with sufficiently in the field of sociology as well as sociolinguistics, with, to some extent, varying definition. Yet, the common thing among those definitions is the shared knowledge by the individuals of a certain society. For instance, Goodenough (19957) defines it as 'whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its [the society's] members'.

Moreover, Hudson (1996) on his part, signifies three types of knowledge in relation to culture

1. Cultural knowledge, which is learned from other people.
2. Shared non-cultural knowledge, which is shared by people in the same society or in the world, yet it is not learned from each other.
3. Non-shared, non-cultural knowledge, which is distinctive of the individual. That is, knowledge which results from the personal experiences.

He (Ibid) indicates that language, since it must be learned from the individuals in the same speech group; therefore, it initiates from the 'cultural knowledge'. That is to say that language is an undividable part of the system of culture, and in order to communicate in a language of a specific community, that community's culture must be made clear to the new speakers. The following two sections are devoted to briefly show the differences of the case study languages in terms of addressing, greeting, and methods of showing gratitude.

3. Courtesy in English and Arabic

This section deals with the differences between English and Arabic courteous language in terms of three main points: forms of address, greetings, and appreciations. The aim is to shed the light on how members of the two cultures communicate among each another in a respectful way. This will be the background against which the results of the questionnaire will be viewed.

3.1 Terms of Address

Term of address is the title telling the interrelation between one and the other, as well as of the other's status or career. A particular way of address must take culture, society, education, belief, age, gender, etc. into consideration.

The English linguistic ways of addressing people are various; however, as a general rule, the English men prefer not to use the headship terms on constant basis when there is a relation between the interlocutors. In fact, except for some terms like: *premier*, *president*, *professor*, *chairman*, etc., the Englishmen prefer to call one another by the first name usually. Nevertheless, address terms like *doctor* and *waiter* are used to a great extent. When the conversation is between two individuals who do not know each other, unless told to call the other person by their first name, the addressing term is the last name of the addressee preceded by 'Mr.' For the most part headship terms are used in formal situations such as the army, the royal family, etc. For example: *President Obama*, *Prince Williams*, *Judge James, Professor Adams, etc.*

In Arabic, the first name is usually used as a way of addressing among people of the same social status. Often times, when people are married and have children, the usualy way of addressing is by using the oldest child's name preceded by 'father of X' for the males and 'mother of X' for the females. For instance, if a man's oldest son's name is 'Ahmed' he would be called 'Abo Ahmed', and that man's wife would be called 'Um Ahmed'. In more formal situations, however, a headship term is often used with the first name of the addressee, unlike English which uses it with the last name. For example, *Mr. Adam, Miss Sarah, Doctor Abass, Professor Zeena,* etc.

3.2 Greetings

Greetings in English and Arabic differ in their content. For, there are two types of greeting: formal and informal. For the former, 'hello' is usually used as a form of greeting

someone the speaker does not have a close connection with, or someone who is superior, like, a boss, a manager, a headmaster, etc. Regarding the informal greeting, the words 'hi', 'what's up', 'how is it going', etc. serve as means of greeting people who are from the same social class and among the members of family and friends.

Moreover, if an English man wants to start a conversation with some he does not know, he would usually ask about the weather, a strategy called 'phatic communication'. The addresser in this case does not really seek an answer for, say, 'a beautiful weather today, isn't it?' but it is just a way to break the ice between the speaker and the listener (James, 1980). This is so because English people do not ask other about personal issues with people they are not acquainted with, so they adhere to this kind of communication instead.

In Arabic, however, there is usually one constant form of addressing which is 'asalamualaikum'. This form is often used in both formal and informal situations. Nevertheless, there are other forms of greeting which can also be used in all situations, like 'marhaba', 'kaifalaha', and the like.

3.3 Appreciations

According to the Western culture, a 'thank you' is always a must no matter how trivial the thing achieved is. This is because of the social norms which result from the fear of the other's negative face violation as well as the social distance (or the so-called 'my space'). For instance:

1) "Did you sleep well?" "Not bad, thank you."
2) "You are a pretty girl." "Thank you." "Thank you"

may be used between a father and his son/daughter, between a senior and the junior, and so on.

In the Arabic culture, however, a 'thank you' is not always necessary, though not uncommon. This is reflected through the fact that Arab people are so generous that some errands done for other are considered as normal and not worthy of thanking for. Instead, a praying for the person who did something is more common. In Iraq, for example, a praying which asks mercy for the other's parents is so common ('May God show mercy upon your parents'). The greeting and appreciation is strongly connected to the religious nature of the people of the Arabic culture; therefore, it can be found prevailing in this culture.

4. Politeness Theories

The definition of politeness depends on a certain society because it is a culturally defined phenomenon, so that different things are considered to be polite in different societies; it represents social standards of how to behave or of what kind of conduct is considered 'right' (Marmaridou, Nikiforidou and Antonopoulou, 2005: 349).

For instance, it has been defined as a set of conversational strategies aimed to uphold and improve social bonds (Maria and Pastor, 2001:18). Further, politeness is an observable way of appropriate behavior through which the speaker is interested in showing respect for the addressee who would comprehend it as polite (LPRG, 2011: 37).

The theories of politeness begun after Grice introduced his 'Cooperative Principle' which comprises a number of maxims, the violation of which leads to 'implicatures'. The maxims are: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Later, Grice added that the Cooperative Principle may need to be increased by the addition of more maxims, one of which, he proposed, is the

maxim of Politeness (Watts, 2003: 58). The following sections introduce briefly the most prominent politeness theories.

Lakoff (1973), through pragmatics, highlighted Grice's maxim of politeness (Elen, 1999: 10). She states that every communicative situation has 'pragmatic competence'; therefore, utterances are evaluated as 'pragmatically appropriate' (Watts, 2003:59). In her theory, Lakoff proposes two rules for pragmatic competence:

1. Be clear (based on Grice's Cooperative Principle Maxims).
2. Be polite.
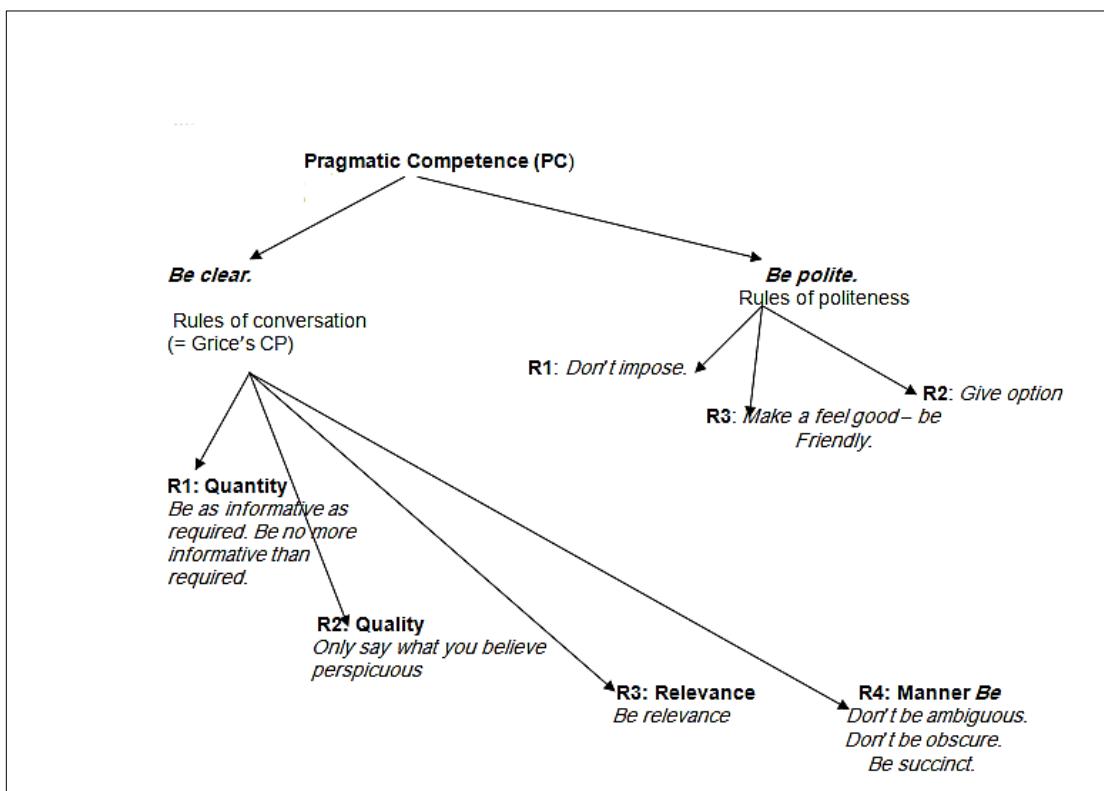
Figure 1 *Lakoff 's rules of pragmatic competence*

The first principle (Be clear) is derived from Grice's CP and maxims; it indicates that individuals should say what they desire to say clearly and properly in their communication, while the second principle focuses on the using the rules of politeness to give the addressee a respectful communication (Lakoff,1993:298). The following is an elaboration of each maxim.

 1. Don't impose: Principle of Distance or Formality is often used in power-marked interactions, where formality, mitigation, avoidance, asking permission.

2. Give options: Principle of Deference, it means to state a request as a question, allow the addressee to control the topic of discourse so that he or she can choose what to talk about and allow yourself to be interrupted but don't interrupt your partner .

3. Make A feel good: be friendly (Principle of Camaraderie) is used between intimates and close friends. By giving your addressee as much eye contact as you can, this shows that you are interested in your addressee's topic; smile is most important way to indicate your linking for your partner (Perry, Turner and Sterk, 1992: 132).

Lakoff designed the rules of politeness to make people easily understand each other when they a conversation.

In his approach, Leech (1983) demonstrates the idea of 'how language is used in communication'. Just like his predecessor, Leech draws on Grice's maxims in his explanation of politeness which, in his view, aims to control the 'social balance and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative' (Watts, 2003:65). In other words, it maintains positive emotions amongst the social groups. Mainly, Leech's proposition is that the CP alone seems to break down certain utterances, like:

A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we.

B: Well, we'll all miss BILL. (original emphasis)

B fails to abide by the maxim of Quantity. When asked to respond to A's opinion B only replies to part of it. This suggests that they "will not miss Agatha". Leech adds that if B said "but not Agatha," so as to abide by the maxim of Quantity, the expression would still be correct, pertinent and clear. Then, why did B neglect the cooperative Principle? It appears that B "suppressed the desired information in order to support the politeness principle" Leech (1983: 80). Therefore, Leech presents three pragmatics scales which impact "the degree of tact appropriate to a given speech situation";

1- The cost-benefit scale: "according to which a speaker has to weigh the mount of cost to her/himself and the amount of benefit his utterance will bring the hearer (Benefit to other. Benefit to self)."

2- The optionality scale: "the amount of choice of the addressee to perform a proposed action. .(*e.g, You know ,I really do think you ought to sell that old car,its costing more and more money in repairs and it uses up far too much fuel)*.the addressee is left with a wide degree of choice to accept or reject the advice .(More choice. More polite)"

3-The indirectness scale: "how much inference is involved in the proposed action. e.g. *could you open the door?* is more polite than *Open the door.*"
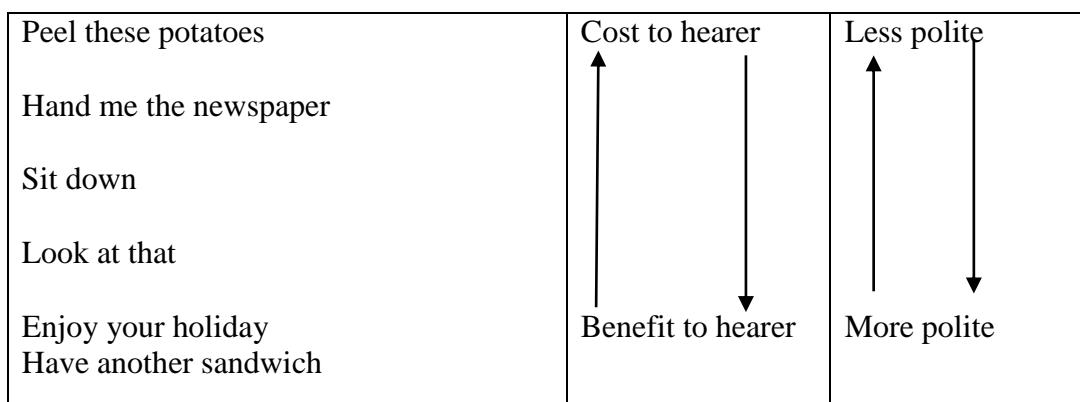
Figure 2. The cost-benefit scale
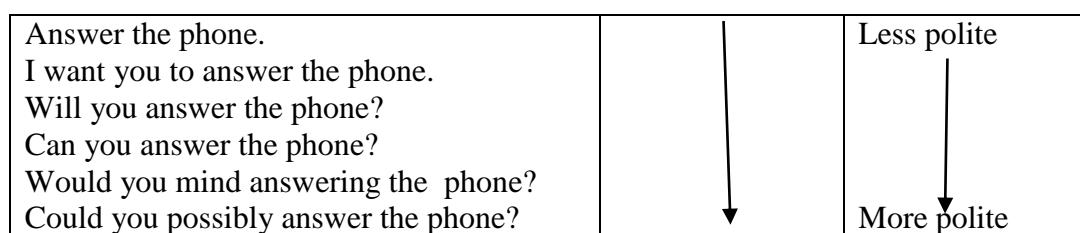
Figure 3. The indirectness scale

Then he add two more scales; the authority scale and the social distance scale. These scales clarify why some utterances are not acceptable in certain conditions because of the relationship between the partners. e,g *Make me a cup of coffee* might be suitable for an employer to say to his or her assistant but not the opposite (Locher,2004:63). The fundamental concept in Leech's model is that of a cost--benefit scale of politeness related to both the speaker and the hearer. Politeness, according to Leech, involves minimizing the cost and maximizing the benefit to speaker/hearer.

The PP thus consists of six maxims, all of which are related to the notion of cost and benefit:

1- The Tact Maxim: this maxim aims at minimizing costs to the speaker and maximizing benefits to the audience.

2-Generosity Maxim: this maxim aims at maximizing the benefits for others and minimizing benefits for self.

3-Approbation/Praise Maxim: this maxim aims at minimizing dispraise of the audience and maximizing praise/approval of the audience.

4-Modesty Maxim: this maxim aims at minimizing praise of self and maximizing dispraise of self.

5-The Agreement Maxim: this maxim aims at minimizing disagreement with the audience and maximizing agreement.

6-Sympathy Maxim: this maxim aims at minimizing antipathy towards the audience and maximizing sympathy.

5. Politeness and culture

Brown and Levinson (1987) state that the politeness principle may be universal across all cultures. Cultures differ, however, in how they define politeness and in how important politeness is in comparison with, say, openness or honesty. For instance, saying "please" and "thank you," maintaining a focused communication with proper eye contact, and/or not evaluating someone negatively in public are all examples of polite behaviours but their significance differs from one culture to another.

Every human being has a dignity of face but this image differs among cultures in terms of when and how it could be threatened or saved. That is to say, each culture has a face threatening act, but the difference is which utterance can be distinguished as face threatening act and which is not. (Elen, 2001:159)

The norms of politeness in English might interfere with other cultures. For example, as mentioned earlier, English has certain speech acts that can be used only for "phatic communication" which do not require a certain answer. Other example include rhetorical questions, like "How are you" and "Can I help you". Other cultures, however, may not have such features which, if interfered, may lead to misunderstanding and/or miscommunication, and to, in ex023.erreme cases, to appearing impolite (Bengsch, 2010: 17).

6. Politeness and the Cooperative Principle

The concept of politeness springs from Grice's Cooperative Principle. According to Lakoff (Cited in Fasold, 1990: 159), who associates it with indirectness, the cooperative principle clarifies how a receiver can understand more than is actually said from an utterance by abiding by or flouting certain maxims. These maxims are: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. Violating any of these maxims leads to implicature. When conversational implicature is violated, politeness will arise.

A-Jim has just borrowed your car.

B- Well, I like that.

The previous example shows a violation of the quality maxim because what B says untrue, yet this is not stated directly. B tries to be polite towards A. However, his utterance implies that he is not. Cook (1989: 83) states that the principle of politeness is mutually incompatible, such as how one can tell his friend that his haircut is bad.

A- I am sorry. The carrots are overdone.

B- No they are exactly right.

Here, A assumes that B is pretending to be polite. Her interpretation of B's utterance is a lie motivated by politeness (Kallia, 2004: 152).

A- Are you coming to the party this morning?

B- I have much work to do.

B's replay is a form of polite refusal. It is not literally related to A's utterance, but by observing the context, the speaker may create an implicture that addressee is not coming since he is busy.

Leech says that unless you are polite to the addressee, the channel of communication breaks down, therefore, Grice suggested that 'be polite' must be added to his maxims.

7. Politeness and Gender

In terms of politeness, Holmes, (1995) states that gender differences (as well as similarities) in the expression of politeness are numerous. On a general scale, studies from several different cultures demonstrate that women use more polite forms than men do (Brown, 1980; Wetzel, 1988; Holmes, 1995). In both informal conversation and in engagement situations, women tend to pursue more areas of agreement than do men. For instance, young girls are keener in terms of modify expressions of disagreement, whereas young boys try to express more "bald disagreements" (Holmes, 1995).

Regarding similarity between the two genders, both men and women in the United States and New Zealand appear to pay praises in similar ways (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Holmes, 1986, 1995). Further, both men and women use politeness strategies when communicating bad news in an organization (Lee, 1993). However, in which aspect(s) do men and women differ? Coates (1998:23) declares that lexical difference is the most common dissimilarity between males and females. Moreover, women tend to use more compliments than men do, since these maximize the degree of friendless, and are used to show bond as shown in the following example that is between two friends:

A-Hi! How are you? You are looking amazing!

B-Thanks! How are things with you? That is a wonderful bag!

8. Case Study

In this section, a group of (30) EFL students was chosen to fill out a questionnaire form which contains certain situations about courtesy. The aim is to test their ability to choose appropriate forms of speech in the situations of addressing, greeting, and gratitude. Their answers are compared with those of the native speakers in order to show to which extent they differ from or similar to them. The selected group consists of (15) male and (15) female EFL students so as to highlight the second aim which is to observe whether there are any differences between the male and female courteous choice of speech.

9. Results

The results of the research show that most of the examined students were affected by their first language's culture to varying extents. That is, the terms of address were the most affected, followed by the greetings, and finally, the appreciation terms were the least affected.

In terms of percentage, the results showed that (70%) of the students were affected by their first language culture in terms of addressing others, with varying social status. The examinees were also affected by their own culture when came to greeting, since the students used answers similar to those found in their native language's culture. Finally, the terms of appreciation are found to be the least affected by the behavioural norms of the students' first language culture, because answers contained similarities to those of the Arabic culture. The reason for the latter is believed to be due to the somehow similar terms and cultural behaviours of the cultures of both languages.

Finally, regarding the differences between male and female politeness strategies, the females were found to be more polite in their dealings than the males. That is, most of the female students used more polite speech than the male students who used regular everyday expressions.

10. Conclusions

What may be concluded from the above mentioned results is that, for the most part, students of EFL in Iraqi academic institutes are affected to a great extent by their native culture when they speak English. This is because the lack of exposure to the target language's culture, life styles, and social norms, etc. Moreover, female, in general, are found to be more polite in their daily bases conversations than the males, which probably springs from genetic reasons. Therefore, EFL students in Iraq must be aware of the cultural differences which exist beteen the Westrn and Eastern cultures in order for them to converse appropriately when they use the target language, especially in authentic settings.

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Appendix: A Questionnaire

1. PERSONAL INFORMATION

1.1. Gender: male _____ female _____

1.2. Age: _____

1.3. Place of birth: _____

1.4. Mother tongue: _____

1.5. What other languages do you speak?

_____   _____   _____

2. Language/Culture Effect

2.1 Terms of Address

I. You are walking in London and the person in front of you drops his/her wallet, how would you address him/her?

_____

II. How would you address a colleague who works with you in the same company?

_____

III. If you lived in an American neighborhood, would you call your older neighbor by his first name?

Yes_____ or No_____

IV. Suppose you were studying at an English college, how would you address your professor whose name is Adam Laveen?

V. You are at an English restaurant, how would you call the waiter?

2.2 Greeting

I. How would you greet someone you know for a long time but with whom you do not have a close relation?

II. How would you respond to the following?

> X. Hi! How are you doing today?
> Y. _____

III. How would you respond to the following?

> X. Great weather today, isn't it?
> Y._____

IV. You are in a waiting room with someone, how would you start a conversation with him/her?

V. You are in the market and you meet your manager, how would you greet him/her?

2.3 Appreciation

I. Would you thank your best friend who picks up your key from the floor?

Yes_____ or No_____

II. What would your response be to a friend who asks "how was your night?"

III. Your best friend invites you to lunch at his house, would you thank him?

Yes_____ or No_____

IV. What would your response be to your friend who says "you look great today!"?